

Turning points: the personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers

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‘Turning points’: The personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers

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Abstract

In the current higher education climate, there is a growing perception that the pressures associated with being an academic middle manager outweigh the perceived rewards of the position. This paper investigates the personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers by drawing on data from life history interviews undertaken with 17 male and female Heads of Departments, from a range of disciplines, in a post-1992 UK university. The data suggests that experiencing conflict between personal and professional identities, manifested through different socialisation experiences over time, can lead to a ‘turning point’ and a decision that affects a person’s career trajectory. Although the results of this study cannot be generalised, the findings may help other individuals and institutions move towards a firmer understanding of the academic who becomes Head of Department – in relation to theory, practice and research.

Keywords academic, career, identity, socialisation, head of department, life history

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Introduction

In the current higher education climate, it appears that the notion of what constitutes an academic career is changing. Studies reveal that differences in working conditions, such as the increase of fixed term contracts and a perceived lack of loyalty from both institutions and individuals, has meant that the concept of an academic career today is very different to one of 15 or 20 years ago (Deem, 2004). Academic careers are no longer seen as linear (Poole and Bornholt, 1998), a large number of academic staff are now employed on fixed term contracts (Collinson, 2004), more academics choose to, or have to, change research fields mid-career to keep up with rapidly changing research horizons (Gordon, 2005), and the notion of developing a traditional academic identity throughout a career in academia is perceived to be under threat (Nixon, 1996, Collinson, 2004, Henkel, 2005, Beck and Young, 2005). It has been argued that all such changes can combine to produce an erosion of trust within the profession, greater workloads for academics, a decline in collegiality, and a threat to self-identity (Knight and Trowler, 2000).

These changes to academic careers, coupled with increased accountability across the sector, have meant that the role of the academic Head of Department (HoD), is also changing and becoming increasingly complex (Deem, 2004). It seems that many HoDs are struggling to adequately manage key aspects of their role, as research, teaching and leadership, plus staffing issues take up more and more of their time (Smith, 2002). Personal experience indicates, as a lecturer working in a post-1992 university, that some colleagues feel that the pressures associated with being a HoD outweigh the perceived rewards of the position. Recently, a colleague referred to an internally advertised HoD role at Principal Lectureship (PL) level as a 'Poor Loser's' role. It is perceived that HoDs are taking on an increasing amount of management and bureaucratic work at the expense of their teaching and research,

the outcome of which, for some, is their reduced involvement in the very reasons for entering academia in the first place. If these perceptions are true, why would an academic want to become a HoD?

Paradoxically, while the role of the academic HoD is acknowledged as being complex and difficult, there are academics who seem to enjoy being in this management role. Deem (2000) identifies these individuals as 'career-track managers'. She found that some academics, particularly in post-1992 universities, may want to deliberately move away from teaching and research, and see taking on a management role as a way of achieving this goal. Several other reasons have been identified to help explain why academics may want to become HoDs and enjoy being in the position. They may be passionate about being seen as the representative academic, ensuring that the views of their colleagues are heard at senior management level (Smith, 2005). They may also become quite protective of their staff and want to support them and help them develop; Bryman's (2007) extensive review into effective leadership in higher education found that HoDs perceived that securing resources for their department and developing their staff were crucial aspects of their role. In addition, they may be pleased to be in a position where they can do something about the things that they feel are important (Parker, 2004).

Given all the pressures and changes affecting academic careers and the HoD position, and the possible negative or positive experiences of being a HoD presented above, this paper aims to describe, analyse and interpret the circumstances that lead academics to become HoDs in a post-1992 university. It draws on data from 17 life history interviews with a range of HoDs in a post-1992 University, undertaken as part of a larger study investigating the career trajectories of academics who become HoDs (Floyd, 2009). Specifically, this paper reports on findings to address the following research question:

- What are the personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become HoDs in a selected UK university?

The main argument rehearsed in this paper is that it is impossible to fully understand an academic's career decisions without exploring the nexus and inter-relationships between their personal and professional identities, manifested through different socialisation experiences over time. Although it is acknowledged that the results of this study cannot be generalised, some writers argue that interpretative research findings can help others in similar positions elsewhere understand their own situations by transferring, applying and comparing findings to their own settings (Bryman, 2008; Silverman, 2006) and so it is hoped that this study may help other individuals and institutions move towards a firmer understanding of the academic who becomes HoD - in relation to theory and practice. It is also hoped that the data presented here may help detail and develop existing knowledge about academic careers and provide possible avenues for future research, particularly as, compared to traditional career research, the empirical evidence and theory base connected to modern professional careers is rather sparse (Iellatchitch et al., 2003).

The paper is organised into four main sections. Section one outlines the theoretical framework that was used to interpret the study's findings. Section two gives a brief overview of the methodology and methods used in the study. Section three reports and discusses the findings under the headings 'Family background and schooling', 'University experiences and emerging career', 'Forming an academic identity', and 'Reasons for becoming a HoD', which were the overarching themes that emerged from the data analysis. Finally, in the conclusion, the implications for theory and practice are explored.

Theoretical Framework

The data collected for this study were interpreted using the inter-related sociological concepts of ‘socialisation’ and ‘identity’ and by drawing on Giddens’ (1984) theory of ‘structuration’ to help understand the nexus between structure and agency in the development of an academic career. Socialisation is the process of interaction by which an individual learns to behave and act in accepted ways in given situations in order to belong to a particular society (Turner, 1994; Marsh and Keating, 2006). Primary socialisation begins in childhood, with the first few years of a person’s life being the most important in learning fundamental cultural behaviours (Giddens, 2006). This is where key skills of communication and interaction are learned, with the immediate family being the main ‘agent of socialisation’ for the individual (Giddens, 2006: 166). As people grow older, they move into secondary socialisation processes and begin to interact with people outside the family. The agencies of socialisation, the social contexts within which significant socialisation occurs, change from the immediate family to include school, peer groups, the mass media, different organisations and the workplace. It is through these socialisation experiences that people begin to develop a sense of self, a sense of identity. Moreover, this identity is never fixed:

One’s identity – ones identities, indeed, for who we are is always singular and plural – is never a final or settled matter. Not even death freezes the picture: identity or reputation can be reassessed... (Jenkins, 2004: 5)

In modern society, in line with Jenkin’s definition above, it has been argued that people have multiple identities (Burke and Stets, 2009; Simon, 2004), that these multiple identities are a product of both structure and agency (Giddens, 1984), and that they are in a constant state of change over time (Jenkins, 2004). Thus, it is impossible to think about ideas of individual identity without understanding that people develop socially constructed multiple identities

and that these identities are continually being negotiated and re-negotiated through the life course. These ideas provided the theoretical framework to help the author understand and interpret the data gathered in this study.

Methods

To answer the above research question, a life history approach (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) was used. This approach was adopted because, in order to understand more fully the career trajectories of academics who become HoDs, it is argued that they cannot be explained in isolation but need to be understood with reference to context, temporality and the individual.

Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008), was used to identify appropriate participants. More specifically, a stratified purposeful sampling approach was used to help illustrate sub groups of HoDs (e.g. female, male, discipline specific) and help facilitate comparisons between these sub groups (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In total, life history interviews were undertaken with seven male and 10 female HoDs from a range of disciplines, at one post-1992 UK university (hereafter called the case University). Each participant had responsibility for managing a group of other academics and could be termed an academic middle manager, but not all were in permanent, remunerated posts. The academic backgrounds of each participant were varied: 13 held PhDs and four did not and the sample included one male and two female professors.

The interviews were carried out in three stages. First, the participants received an information sheet, which outlined the aims of the study and gave them an idea of what to expect in their one-to-one interview. This allowed each participant to reflect on his or her career trajectory before meeting with the researcher. Second, a face-to-face interview was set up. Originally, the researcher proposed undertaking two rounds of interviews with each participant, but following feedback regarding time commitments and a reluctance from some

people to take part if this was the case, it was decided to hold one longer single interview and then follow up any outstanding issues and queries through electronic communication. The use of such electronic data collection is increasing and allows people who are busy to fit responses into their own time frame (Lichtman, 2006; Bryman, 2008). To arrange the face-to-face interview, the researcher emailed the participant and arranged a mutually convenient time to meet. This was normally in the participant's office. Prior to each interview, each participant read and signed a consent form, which had been approved by the case University's Research Ethics Committee. This form set out the participant's prerogatives and requested permission for the interview to be recorded and for quotes to be used in future publications. Third, the researcher sent each participant a copy of the interview transcript electronically and asked them to make comments, additions, clarifications and augmentations. They were also invited to add any further thoughts they had had since the meeting. The interview data were supplemented with a number of other sources, including the analysis of key strategic documents produced by the institution linked to management culture and working practices, and web based profiles of each of the respondents. These data were analysed using coding, categorisation and theme formation techniques outlined by Lichtman (2006) and developing profiles of each of the respondents (Seidman, 2006).

Findings and interpretation

Family background and schooling

Even though they had different socio-economic backgrounds, overall the respondents came from families who expected their children to value education in order to improve their life chances, particularly their career choices. These strong familial-cultural expectations help to form individual and social identities (Turner, 1994) and, for the respondents in this study,

meant that they formed identities that valued education and knowledge at an early age. As the following discussion shows, developing such identities heavily influenced the respondents' subsequent career choices.

Although Bourdieu's (1984) thoughts on social class may suggest that all respondents were destined to follow a particular path related to their societal place with little or no allowance for individual choice (Jenkins, 2002; Hodgkinson and Sparkes, 1997), this was not the case for all respondents. Indeed, several of those from working class backgrounds managed to traverse expected traditional academic boundaries and attend grammar school, rather than the local comprehensive. This experience was not without difficulty, however, as Alex and David described. They talked of 'feeling uncomfortable' when in this educational environment, because it was an unusual situation for their family and for their peer group. Perhaps they were feeling uncomfortable because they were experiencing two very different and contrasting socialisation structures, each with different cultures, rules and expectations. Experiencing these different socialisation structures may lead to internal conflict as individuals struggle to identify with both structures and feel uncomfortable as they reflect on their own identity and try to reconcile these differences (Jenkins, 2004). This inability to handle two different sets of cultural norms, and identities, persisted throughout their secondary school experiences and led to Alex doubting his ability to go to university and David joining the Army because he felt he did not have the support of his family to enter the higher education system.

Other respondents, such as Elizabeth, struggled to shake off the expectation from her teachers that, because she had come from a working class background, she would not be able to succeed at school. Elizabeth appeared to have a double disadvantage: she was from a working class background, and she was female. Some writers argue that macro belief systems

relating to gender, as well as class, constrain career aspirations and individual choice for females, which may help explain why Elizabeth's teachers did not believe she could be academically successful (Correll, 2004, 2001; Evetts, 2000). These low expectations from her teachers made her determined to succeed 'because the buggers didn't think I could' and were a key determinant in her undertaking and completing her PhD later in her career. This example shows how an identity conflict, caused by a clash in values between an individual (agent) and their social environment (structure), can lead to an individual reacting positively in making life and career decisions to overcome the odds. It points to the fact that, with appropriate determination, agents may overcome structural constraints and expectations throughout their career.

University experiences and emerging career

Building on individual and collective identities that valued education, cultivated through school and family influences and expectations, 16 of the respondents went straight into higher education from secondary school. Recalling their time at university, seven respondents identified university tutors who had been influential during their undergraduate study. These influential lecturers did not just inspire a love of the subject area, they also helped guide some individuals into academic career paths. In fact, during their undergraduate courses, five respondents were encouraged to undertake a PhD by their university tutors. One such example was Rebecca; significantly, her lecturer was the only female tutor in the department and so provided Rebecca with a role model:

Well I began to think about what I would like to do...possibly going on to further study. I decided in my second year that I would quite like to continue studying and another influential lecturer on my

course...my mentor, he was very supportive, but he was away for a year, I think he was doing a year sabbatical...I had another tutor and she was the only women in the department and she encouraged me and I was thinking of applying to do a Master's course and she said, "You don't want to do that. Apply for a PhD and then if you don't like it, do the Master's because you can drop down and do an MPhil." So, she encouraged me to go and apply for a PhD. I then passed it by my family to do another three years of studying and they were ok about it. (Rebecca, 40, Natural Sciences)

These influential lecturers helped develop individuals' academic identities by encouraging deep learning in relation to a specific subject. Developing subject specific knowledge has been identified as a key aspect of being an academic for both males and females (Beck and Young, 2005; Blaxter et al., 1997) and all but one of the respondents who earned their PhDs in the years immediately following undergraduate study went straight into research or academic positions in universities. Thus, being influenced by their university lecturers led to them gaining socialisation experiences through undertaking a PhD, which in turn seemed to help develop their academic identity, thereby affording the opportunity to begin a career in academia. In developing their academic identity, they appeared to be building on the core values and personal identities developed through primary socialisation experiences and were beginning to align their professional identities with these.

While six of the respondents went into academic posts straight from university, 11 respondents, including Elizabeth, David and Donna, went into other jobs and careers, such as teaching, the army, law, the ministry, the civil service, nursing and industry and then made a mid-career move into academia. These findings reflect contemporary non-linear career theory. They question whether the concept of the traditional hierarchical career structure is still an appropriate framework to help understand modern career trajectories, as people develop more individually focused career paths based on the concept of the 'boundaryless'

career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The current literature suggests a paradigm shift from the traditional hierarchical career pattern within one organisation, to one where individuals take charge of their career path and work in a variety of roles within a range of organisations (Becker and Haunschild, 2003; Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Gold and Fraser, 2002; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). It is reasonable to suggest that, for academics, this phenomenon is probably more prominent in a post-1992 university, such as the case University, than in a more traditional pre-1992 university. As a former polytechnic, with its emphasis on applied, vocational courses, recruitment policies may favour individuals who have worked in other sectors previously.

The reasons that these respondents gave for making a move into academia included wanting a new challenge, making a difference and reflecting on core values. These reasons appeared to reflect each respondent's personal identity, still strongly linked to education and learning, as the following comment from Michelle shows:

I realised it was something I really believed in, just something that was so important and I could see the point of it all, and it was all the stuff coming together for me. (Michelle, 49, Natural Sciences)

Michelle's case represents her maturing through a socialisation process by which she came to discover her 'true' sense of values and personal identity.

As well as these career decisions linking to identities that valued education, learning and knowledge, they were also entwined with personal or professional socialisation experiences. A case in point was David, who wanted to move away from his system-related job to one that entailed working with, and helping, people. A further example was Harry, who

was experiencing conflict between his core values and aspects of his job, a disharmony that was causing him increasing discomfort. Harry began to do a PhD in order to help him understand and reflect on the difficult job role he was experiencing and this led to a move into academia. In addition, he was keen to move away from aspects of his job with which he felt uncomfortable:

It was difficult. It was a very, very difficult job. So, I decided to do a doctorate in professional development because I thought, ‘ I have a professional development job basically and I need some kind of platform basis to stand back from what I am doing and understand it in a kind of dispassionate way’ ... I was well into my doctorate and reaching towards the end of my four years and so I made this very...and I had moved more and more into staff development... I didn’t like those aspects of my job, kind of exploitative aspects of being a manager in a resource tight organisation...so I made the decision, jointly with my wife, that I would apply for the lecturing job here. (Harry, 62, Social Sciences)

When Harry reflected on and made sense of his experiences, he began to realise that his personal identity, his sense of self, made up of core values developed through prior socialisation experiences, was more important to him than his present professional identity. Harry’s story shows how a conflict between personal and professional identities, manifested through different socialisation experiences over time, can lead to a ‘turning point’ and a decision that affects a person’s career trajectory.

Other respondents who experienced an identity conflict of this type also embarked on PhDs, which led to them gaining socialisation experiences and developing their academic identities, thereby allowing them to begin careers in academia. Their cases show that although the structures in which people operate are socially constructed and people may be

expected to play particular roles in society (Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1994), individuals (as agents) are often determined enough to change career paths and cut through or across such structures, and that in higher education, education and gaining qualifications can help individuals do this.

Forming an academic identity

Once they had embarked on academic careers, all respondents felt that they began to form distinct academic identities built around teaching, research or both. These academic identities were formed by the interaction between experiences and values gained through previous primary and secondary socialisation experiences and new socialisation experiences gained during their doctorates and working in the case University. Some respondents, such as Rebecca, deliberately chose to work at the case University because they felt they would 'fit in' to the organisation:

I mean at first lecturing was quite terrifying. I had never been somebody who was very comfortable at standing up in front of a group. If you told me as a school child that that's what I would do for a living I would have been horrified, but after a while you get used to it and I enjoyed it. It was very challenging and I enjoyed some of the topics that I was going to teach, some of them became really strong interests in my subsequent research which was good...I took the job here because it was very much a teaching institution, certainly at the time, and seemed like somewhere I could fit in. (Rebecca, 40, Natural Sciences)

This suggests that a person's identity matches to varying degrees the organisation they join. The better the match, the more an individual is likely to feel they belong, the more willing

they are to assume certain roles, and the greater extent to which their career trajectories are likely to be influenced as a result (Chen, 1998). If an individual can balance their professional and personal identities by choosing careers or roles that are in more line with their core values or by changing the social structures in which they work to align them, they may be more likely to stay within that particular career structure or role.

Other respondents felt that their identities had changed since working at the case University, as the following example from Hannah illustrates:

...one of the things that has happened to me since I have been here is that I've got really interested in the practice of teaching. I think the whole student centred approach here has rubbed off on me in a big way... (Hannah, 41, Arts and Humanities)

This example confirms that academic identities are a product of both structure and agency and are in a constant state of change over time (Jenkins, 2004). Furthermore, these academic identities are heavily influenced by socialisation experiences within a particular HE institution. Indeed, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002: 206) argue that in an educational context, socialisation does not entail passive involvement of an individual within an existing structure, but is an 'interpretive and interactive' process between the individual and the structure, with both affecting each other. Encountering strong organisational socialisation experiences and culture may change professional and even personal values and identities; or may drive people away who feel unwilling or unable to adapt to such identity changes.

The interactive process between agency and structure is an important notion to consider when interpreting the findings from this study, as Svejenova (2005) suggests that

human agency and individuals are now seen as the driving force behind career trajectories. Within the higher education context, Gordon (2003) also discusses the importance of the individual. He suggests that in order for institutions to comprehend the changes and tensions taking place within their academic workforce, they should look to understand the notion of the individual's career path within their organisation. Within the case University, 15 of the respondents recalled that before they became HoDs they had no ambitions to become an academic leader. In addition, of the 12 respondents who had made a mid career move into academia, five respondents, including Harry, had made a deliberate career move into higher education to avoid such management roles. These data suggest that academics may have very different perceptions of such roles in relation to their own career trajectory compared to the institutions' perceptions of the benefits of taking on such a role for the individual. More research into this apparent mismatch of academic career trajectory understanding seems necessary.

Reasons for becoming a HoD

The apparent mismatch between the case University's and academics' perceptions of the importance of the role of HoD in contributing to academics' career trajectories can be further illustrated by interpreting the respondents' reasons for becoming HoDs. Only four out of the 17 participants claimed that they had taken on the job role for career development. Furthermore, those who did see career advancement in the role, such as Donna, came from very research active schools, where the HoD role was more heavily linked to research development than departmental management:

My main reason was career development... I think the freshness and a new challenge and in a different place, with a different group of people. I have to say it was the job as head of department, but also the place in terms of my research. So there was a particular research connection that made it very attractive to come here because my specialism is very particular and very small... (Donna. 53, Social Sciences)

Research leadership, rather than departmental management, was perceived to be more important for these respondents; within a research-led department, the HoD position was seen as contributing more towards career advancement than in other more teaching-focused departments. These findings suggest that the culture of the department within which an academic is working, and the school within which the department is based, provides important contextual information to help understand the socialisation experiences of the individual, their professional and personal identities, and, in turn, their career trajectories. Departmental cultures even within the same university seem to vary considerably (Becher, 1989; Becher and Trowler, 2001; McAleer and McHugh, 1994; Smith, 2005). Institutions, therefore, cannot assume that a 'one size fits all' approach to career development strategies will be successful. Strategies need to be tailored to the organisational culture of each department and the individual concerned.

Eight respondents, including Hannah and Rebecca, were persuaded by their deans to apply for the role of HoD. This 'vote of confidence' helped them realise that they would be able to take on the role successfully. Having their ability and skills externally recognised by someone in authority allowed them to gain more belief in themselves, which duly increased their perceived status, and in turn, gave them the confidence to apply for the role. In the following example, Rebecca, who did not feel quite ready for the job role at the time, describes how being asked to take on the role confirmed to her that she could do it:

In 2003, my HoD decided to take early retirement...I don't think he was quite 60. He had been doing the job for 20 years, and I did think maybe I should be head of department, but I didn't feel quite ready for it at the time. I was still relatively young in those days. And the dean of the school called me in to talk to me and said she thought I should apply for the job. This confirmed that she thought I would be able to do it and, although it wasn't exactly the timing I would have chosen, I applied and I was the only candidate and I got the job. I also thought that I would rather that I was in charge instead of somebody else. It was an internal appointment and I felt I could do a good job and it was important. (Rebecca, 40, Natural Sciences)

Seven of the academics, including Alex, perceived that taking on the HoD role would allow them much more flexibility and control over their working environment. He commented:

What I really have been driven by, and I think this has been a feature of other so called career progressions where I have gone into high levels of management within my career, I have been motivated by a desire to either clear a space for myself or to have a greater control of my own destiny or working environment. And that's been a greater motivator than it has been to be a manager or in a leadership role. I think that has happened here. The jobs have come up and it's been if I don't do this, then I'll have to go back and do... five hundred hours is attached to this role, that 500 hours I'll be teaching and it's not what I want to do. At least if I do this I might be able to create some space to do the research which I want to do... (Alex, 53, Social Sciences)

These respondents wanted to gain more individual control over the social and organisational structures in which they were working, which according to their reasoning, would allow them to change key aspects of the position thereby aligning their professional and personal

identities more closely. Gaining more control over how their professional lives were organised was also the case for a further five respondents, including Wendy, who applied for the position in order to ensure they were not managed by people they felt were not up to the job.

Finally, nine of the respondents talked about how taking on the role would allow them to make a difference, in a way that related to their core values and individual identities, cultivated through earlier primary and secondary socialisation experiences. These respondents felt the need to gain more experience and responsibility by taking on a more senior role. This, they felt, would allow them to make changes to the social structures and systems in which they worked and align them more closely with their own developing set of values, thus providing another example of the interaction between agency and structure in a social system. As an example, Sheila took on the role to save her colleagues from someone she perceived to be problematic and to make positive changes to the department:

So I went for it for a number of reasons, not because I was desperate to be head of department, but because I thought it would save the group if somebody was there who could work with her. And I thought it would save me from a job that was impossible, you know just not viable...In a way everything I have done pointed to that as being okay for the next move. I've always run teams and run courses, you know run course teams. I have always enjoyed doing that. And I could see I'd learned a lot about bad management from the people around me, so I thought, 'if you just let me do that I am sure I can make that happen.' (Sheila, 54, Social Sciences)

All the above examples convey a sense of agents exerting, or at least attempting to exert, control to overcome structures, with individuals experiencing their own 'turning point' when

they realised that by undertaking the HoD role, they might start to change the organisational structures within which they worked. Conceptually, this might be interpreted as the respondents seeking to bring their professional identities more in line with their core values and personal identities.

Conclusions

In relation to becoming an academic, the respondents in this study can be categorised into two main groups: those who went straight into an academic career from university and those who embarked on a different career before making a move into academia. For those who went straight into an academic career, it appears that they built on core values and personal identities that valued knowledge and education (developed through primary and secondary socialisation experiences at home, school and university) and aligned their professional identities with these. For these respondents, their personal identities influenced their initial career choice, which in turn influenced their subsequent professional and organisational socialisation experiences and hence, in turn, further reinforced and deepened their professional identities.

For all of the respondents in this study, after leaving full time education, experiencing different socialisation experiences at home and at work meant that they began to develop multiple personal and professional identities, each with their own expectations of behaviour and social role. Those respondents who made a mid-career move into academia appeared to experience conflicts between and within their professional and personal identities during their first careers. This conflict eventually led them to reflect on their job and career at the time and subsequently to make career-changing decisions to become academics in order to align their professional and personal identities more closely. Thus, for these respondents, it was

their professional and organisational socialisation experiences at work that caused them to experience personal and professional identity clashes, which, in turn, influenced their subsequent career trajectory into academia.

In relation to becoming a HoD, it appears that all respondents felt that by assuming the HoD position, they would be enabled to change the social and organisational structures within which they worked, and to align their multiple personal and professional identities more closely and manage them more successfully. This can be seen by examining their reasons for taking on the HoD role, which include making a difference and having more control over their work. They felt that a change in career role would allow them to exert more control over their professional and organisational socialisation, which, in turn, would allow more harmony with their professional and personal identities. These findings suggest that individuals may experience critical career events or ‘turning points’ in relation to balancing and managing identity conflicts during their careers through assuming more senior roles, in this case, department headship. Assuming such a promotional position is seen as empowering. It is seen as providing leverage to change the organisational structures within which they work so as to better accommodate and align with their preferred professional identities. However, for several of the respondents in this study, changing the structures within which they worked proved more difficult than they first thought and their initial intentions and aspirations failed to materialise.

The findings from this study suggest that some academics’ careers mirror modern career theory, with 11 of the 17 respondents entering academia following a different prior career experience. The notion that people are experiencing more ‘boundaryless’ careers and the possibility that most academics’ career trajectories, especially in the post-1992 HE sector, no longer fit the traditional linear academic career suggests that future recruitment strategies

may need to target other professions. For those participants who had followed the more traditional route into academia by undertaking a PhD and gone straight into an academic post, it appears that these decisions were heavily influenced by significant others (academics) through their undergraduate and postgraduate socialisation experiences. This suggests there may be an important recruitment role to be played by individual academics in encouraging talented students to think about joining the profession, particularly in the current climate where future recruitment may be adversely affected due to the changing notion of what an academic career entails.

The trend towards non-linear academic careers also holds implications for academics' identities, particularly in post-1992 universities, as increasing numbers of individuals experience a greater range of professional and organisational roles and need to assume a wider range of multiple, flexible identities. Thus, many academics may develop what Clegg (2008: 340) terms 'hybrid' identities in response to the changing structural environment, based on generic, cross-discipline and cross-university experiences, rather than identities based on traditional notions of discipline specific academic work. Whether or not an academic, who may have entered the profession with a different set of values, can accept these identity changes, may determine whether they stay in the profession or not. Consequently, there may be a 'turning point' in relation to balancing or reconciling personal and professional identities, manifested by certain socialisation experiences, which leads an academic to decide to change their job role or leave the profession altogether.

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